

News Sun, April 20, 2004

WAUKEGAN — Laura Nieto, a 16-year-old Waukegan high school student, knows firsthand the challenges many Latino students face trying to finish high school and continue their education.

Her older brother dropped out of school to work and now she's trying to finish school to be a role model for her younger brothers while also raising her 10-month old daughter.

She was one of the 21 Latino high school students who met with Congressman Mark Kirk (R-Highland Park) and his Latino Advisory Board on Saturday to discuss the challenges leading to the high Latino drop-out rate, and what the government could do to help.

Nieto said her biggest challenge was that her parents weren't able to help her with her homework because her mom never finished grammar school in Mexico and her father is too busy working.

"I used to cry because I was so frustrated because nobody could help me. So now I'm the one who helps my little brothers," Nieto said.

She attends the Alternative Option Education Center in Waukegan where she can take classes at her own pace and where her daughter can receive childcare.

Mark Kirk said this is one of a series of meetings with students and teachers to collect information in order to create a pilot program in the fall that would provide pregnant immigrant women English as a Second Language classes, transportation to the class and childcare.

"We want to make sure that by the time a child is in kindergarten mom can help with their homework," Kirk said. "What we heard here is that many parents can't help students with their homework because it's in English."

The students from Waukegan High School, North Chicago High School, Highland Park High School and the College of Lake County said the lack of transportation and time are two reasons more parents don't take English as a Second Language classes.

Students said peer pressure to join gangs and do drugs also contributes to students dropping out of school. They also said teachers could be more active at trying to keep at-risk students in school and provide extra help.

Brenda Salgado, a senior at Waukegan High School, created an ESL resource center in a computer classroom to assist ESL students. Three times a week honor students and two bilingual teachers provide tutoring as well as resources, such as a list of college scholarships available to undocumented immigrants.

She said one of the resource center's goals is to also involve more ESL students in school activities such as student council and prom.

"They don't know what's going on in our school. We want to involve them in positive changes," Salgado said.

Regarding Saturday's meeting with Congressman Kirk she said at first she was a little skeptical.

"But if I think like that, then we don't get anywhere. I thought it was a good outcome," Salgado said. "Usually it's always students from Chicago that get to give their opinions."